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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a view of traditional American Indian public speaking styles to students studying modern Indian diplomatic talk. A transcription of a talk given by the Chairman of the Confederated Tribes of Siletz provides an example of careful political speaking in the traditional tribal style. A culture which is typically oral, rather than written, places a premium on clear, memorable speech. When listening to other speakers, Indians quickly evaluate a speaker's political credibility through knowledge of the past, and knowledge of the other person's form of political organization. The Indian speaker in the example uses "oral paragraphing" by introducing each new section with "I think." This device gives the speaker a chance to review his thoughts and marks a serious advisory statement. It also reminds listeners to remember that the "I" stands for those the speaker represents. With oral paragraphing, the speaker directs the attention of the audience to the theme, then goes into particulars, then ends by returning the attention of the audience to the theme. (KS)

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Opening Students' Ears to Tribal Talk

NCTE Northwest Regional Conference Presentation May 1-3, 1987, Hotel Vancouver

by Rochelle Cashdan

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You're standing at the front of the classroom on a hot afternoon, sensing that the young people facing you are miles away in spirit. You mention casually that before the white people came, Indians (or natives) didn't have school. Your students look interested in following that train of thought. You veer to the side: Even so, you say, Indian people spoke very well when they met the official representatives of the incoming society. Even today, some of the same techniques are used when tribal representatives meet officially with the general government.

You see that the students who were looking out the window are still looking out. So, you say, on the other hand, a lot of people think spending time on Indian ways is a waste of time. What do you think?

If the class trusts you to listen, you can expect participation now. "Because they're nothing to do with me." "They're far away." "Dead." "They're not important." "Because they lost." "Because they're poor, they're primitive, the chiefs weren't typical, man." Because, because, because. If you're lucky, somebody will qualify something that's said. But don't count on it. And don't intervene. Be glad your students trust you.

You take them back to the times in the last century when people, Indian or not, didn't have radio cassette players, or TV. In those days, well-spoken, well-connected, non-Indian people admired the Noble Indian for his way with words, usually known through surrender speeches. Why, someone asks, did they bother with a surrender speech? You talk this over. You show them several pages of negotiating talk by Indian speakers today.

The talk transcribed below comes from a meeting of the Oregon Commission on Indian Services held at the state capitol about eight years ago. Besides commission members and staff, I and an Indian educator serving in state government were present. Art Bensell, the senior member of the commission and then Chairman of the Confederated Tribes of Siletz, spoke on the issue of member absences:

I think that's a good thing.

I think, going back to when we first started the commission

I think we discussed sending alternates
And all (unclear) sort of thing
And at that time we felt that this was an important organization,
That when you're appointed to it you should be here.

I think it should still be that way.
It shouldn't maybe just go to the individuals concerned
Cause I'm busier than hell too.
And I make it a point that one day, this is where I go.

And I think that other people can do that too
That this is an important thing to the people of Oregon, Indian people

And I think you can see who is missing,
The urban Indian people.
Maybe they feel that we haven't done enough for them, I don't know but (interruption)

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I think when they do show up
When some do show up, they don't stay here.
They're out there running around

And I think that this is where they belong
In the meeting
Yes this is the meeting of (last two words unclear).

You say that college-educated Indian people like Bensell choose to speak for their tribes in traditional ways that have outlasted the political use of tribal languages. Possibly, you add that, in general, people in parliaments and congresses are very good with words—that careful political speaking is not specifically Indian.

Whatever Indian representatives have to say, they are speaking for a tribal council, not for themselves. At least, they don't say anything harmful to their tribal interest. And when they speak, they speak beyond the ears of the others present. They speak to be reported on to councils and at times to the general government.

You note that people without libraries or books or newspapers are likely to put a premium on clear, memorable speech. That even with TV and the rest, many Indians today live their lives out mostly without reading.

You add that when issues come up between tribes or with non-Indians, Indians are quick to size up a speaker's political credibility, that is, whether the person can carry through on his/her promises. Maybe someone in your class will say How can anybody know that? You say From knowing what has happened before and from knowing something about the other person's form of political organization.

You refer to the pages of modern Indian diplomatic talk—for Indian representatives are talking government-to-government—that your students have to study.

You remind the class (yes, Janet is still looking out the window, but enough of the rest are looking at you or at their papers) that reporting will take place without punctuation, spacing, or special type fonts . . . in many instances, without any notes at all.

Instead, the reporting will follow partly from oral paragraphing. This speaker does it by introducing each new section with "I think." His *I think* serves more than one purpose. This device for oral paragraphing gives the speaker a chance to review his thoughts. It is used by Indians as a way to mark a serious advisory statement. And it also reminds listeners to think of who *I* stands for. In this instance, the *I* is not only the man as himself, but also the man as leader of his tribe and a longtime member of the commission. Like the President of the United States, he may speak in a folksy style, but he is always a political figure.

You may decide to stop here or maybe to discuss what else gives this statement power. Or you may decide to talk about a non-Indian who read a similar transcript containing *I think* over and over and mistakenly pitied the speaker for timidity. You assure the class that if they had a number of statements by Indian speakers to look at, they would see that *I think* is said to mark an important statement, not to soften it. (You decide not to push your luck by asking whether the class wants to look at the additional statements.)

If, having glimpsed the social-artistic world behind oral paragraphing, students are interested in noticing more, you can show them how the speaker directs the attention of the audience to the theme (expecting member attendance), then goes into particulars, then ends by returning the attention of the audience to the theme. In my opinion, when an Indian spokesperson does return a listener to the starting point, he/she is actually guiding the listener to revisit a place now made familiar.

The sun has moved a few feet along your window. You and the class have touched on the importance of authority, the mechanics of artistry, a sense of audience, and the shaping power of attitudes, emphasizing what you will.

You think: That's all right for 50 minutes on a hot afternoon.